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DECCAN BIRDERS EVENTS

In light of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic, all Deccan Birders Field Trips and Indoor Meetings are on hold until further notice. Details of upcoming activities will be communicated once the situation improves.

FARMERS OF THE FOREST
Report: Visit to Coorg, February 2020

Jayasurya Pathapati

Organic paddy fields at the resort (Photo: Jayasurya Pathapati)

It was just past mid-February when my better half and I went on a trip to Coorg. We had heard great reviews of a resort, Evolve Back Coorg (Orange County), built amidst a 300-acre coffee and spice plantation, and had decided to spend a few nights there. The resort was known for its location, right by the river Kaveri, and the luxury, but what really floored me were the measures they have taken to conserve biodiversity in and around the resort.

You would be aware that coffee plants are ideally grown amidst tall trees because they need good shade to grow properly. Of course, they do grow without the shade but the quality is usually sub-optimal. So, to maintain good quality, a lot of estates grow the coffee plants amidst tall trees, and most of these trees are cash crops such as Silverwood, Rosewood etc. The problem is, vast acres of forests with indigenous varieties of trees are cleared to grow coffee plants along with the cash-generating trees – which is obviously bad for the fauna, especially birds, too.

A 100-year-old Mango tree
(Photo: Jayasurya Pathapati)

However, some conscientious coffee estate owners have started working towards conserving the biodiversity by not cutting down these indigenous tree varieties, at least in a large part of their estates, if not the whole. Evolve Back Coorg is certainly one of those estates where a good part of the estate still has these 50 to 100-years-old trees of different varieties – the estate was started in 1908! – and the result? They are home to about 300 varieties of avifauna, different wild cats, otters, insects etc, and are also one of the pioneers of responsible tourism in India.

Walk through the coffee & spice plantations
(Photo: Jayasurya Pathapati)

Pepper being sun-dried
(Photo: Jayasurya Pathapati)

During our three nights of stay there, we enjoyed different activities such as nature walk, plantation walk, and of course birdwatching! Just before the start of our birdwatching session early in the morning, we were shown a video on the Malabar Grey Hornbills and their feeding and nesting activities. This fascinating bird is an indicator of rich biodiversity and also plays a crucial role in sustaining the forest. Upon successful mating, the female Hornbill nests in burrows of tall trees to lay its eggs, and seals the opening of the burrow with mud and other material for protection from predators, while leaving a small slit open – just enough for the male Hornbill to pass in some yummy fruits and wild berries! The male Hornbill collects hundreds of small berries and fruits to feed its mate and the hatchlings and, while doing so, covers a huge area of the forest, dispersing the seeds of the berries all across. This very behaviour has earned it the name, Farmer of the Forest!

Our birdwatching guide was a local, trained by experienced naturalists, who got into this profession with a passion for wildlife, especially the insects. Since birdwatching is still relatively new for me, marking exactly a year spent in birdwatching around Hyderabad, we took his help to spot and identify a few birds endemic to the Malabar region.

Malabar Parakeet
(File photo courtesy: Umesh Mani)

Just five minutes into the walk, we spotted my first lifer of the day, the Malabar Parakeet. It was nicely perching on a palm tree with its back towards us. This beautiful bird had long blue feathers on its tail and wings.

Plum-headed Parakeet
(File photo courtesy: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

Rose-ringed Parakeet Male
(File photo courtesy: Umesh Mani)

Rose-ringed Parakeet Female
(File photo courtesy: Umesh Mani)

Moving on, in about 45 minutes of birding, we had spotted a number of Rose-ringed & Plum-headed Parakeets, Golden Orioles, Barn Swallows, White-Rumped Munias, Egrets of all sizes, Malabar Whistling Thrush (call heard), Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters, White-cheeked Barbet etc – all of which had made this beautiful coffee plantation their home.

Barn Swallow (File photo courtesy: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater
(File photo courtesy: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

White-cheeked Barbet
(File photo courtesy: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

Just as the clock struck 8:00AM, our guide rushed us to a particular tree, which was apparently the nesting spot of a pair of Malabar Grey Hornbills! We waited there for about 10 minutes and suddenly heard a ruffle in a nearby tree. We spotted a Hornbill flying in in a rush, in its typical flap and dive style, and behind it was a Shikra chasing it away from our sight!

The guide made us wait for a few more minutes, after which the Hornbill, which seemed to have tactfully escaped from the Shikra, slowly approached its nest and started regurgitating out berries from its throat. It dropped the berries into the nest with its beak through the slit. We noticed that it was all being done in a rush, so as to not risk being pursued by the Shikra again. Even the female, which typically thrusts out its beak to receive the food, did not peek out. We also noticed a berry slip out of the Hornbill's beak, and our guide with a surprised look, told us that whenever a berry slipped out of its beak, the Hornbill would generally swoop down to catch the berry mid-air; however, today it seemed to be in a hurry! It was definitely a great encounter and worth every bit of the longing we had felt to sight it, ever since we heard of these fascinating birds!

Malabar Grey Hornbill
(File photo courtesy: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

Solid Waste segregation (Photo: Jayasurya Pathapati)

In this trip, apart from seeing a good variety of birds and plants, I witnessed how amazing the results of well-planned biodiversity conservation and responsible tourism could be. Right from waste management to controlling noise pollution (no loud music/DJ parties), the resort stood as a shining example for activities directed towards inclusivity of non-human beings. They have also started an interesting activity called 'Shinrin Yoku' – a Japanese activity popularly known world-wide as "Forest bathing".

During this trip, I have also developed an interest in trees, especially those that attract varieties of birds. I aspire to plant such trees around my neighbourhood, which in turn will attract some birds. I would love to wake up to beautiful bird calls, not just in such trips, but every day of my life from right where I live.

Malabar Giant Squirrel
(Photo: Jayasurya Pathapati)

Also, being a great coffee lover, I have started sourcing my coffee from estates that take biodiversity conservation seriously, and are duly certified for it.

Kaveri River (Photo: Jayasurya Pathapati)

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FIGHTER MOM: The Sparrow Story

Text and Photos: Wg Cdr Yella Prakash Rao

House Sparrow female with young ones

The House Sparrow population in my colony is gradually showing an improving trend, thanks to some of the residents putting up wooden nest boxes and bird feeders around their houses.

I remember in 2010 there were just about 5 or 6 Sparrows in the colony, struggling to locate living spaces. That year there were just about two nests made of hay in the toilet ventilator of an unoccupied house. The situation since then has changed for good. Currently there are more than a dozen pairs in the colony and we can see and hear them at any given time during the day.

I had put up four wooden nest boxes around my house in 2012 and since then they have been occupied by the Sparrows, churning out fledglings season after season. These nest boxes have also served as maternity wards to Indian Robins, Oriental Magpie Robins, Scaly-breasted Munias and Indian Silverbills, on a time share basis!

The current episode relates to the nest box placed on the western wall of my house behind the bedroom. We started hearing mild chirping of the chicks from this nest box in the second week of April. The parents were generally restless and were not very happy to see us in the balcony, due to the presence of the chicks in the nest. On April 14, 2020 we woke up to a commotion of distress calls of the Sparrows. When I entered the balcony, all the birds flew off and thus I could not identify the cause of the commotion. In the past a Southern Coucal and a Rufous Treepie had attempted to steal the chicks from the nest, but were unsuccessful due to the design of the nest box, and I thought there may be a similar predator around.

The next day, there were similar distress calls and, on entering the balcony, I noticed a couple of feathers on the balcony floor. A few minutes later I heard the noises again while standing on the terrace and this time I noticed a male Magpie Robin attacking the tailless mother Sparrow as it was entering the nest. The Sparrow parents fought valiantly to ward off the threat. It was then that I realised that the feathers on the balcony floor were that of the Sparrow mother, probably plucked out by the Magpie Robin a few minutes earlier while she was in the process of feeding the chicks. The mother, which had a tail the previous day, was now devoid of it and thus it was easy for me to identify the mother. It was apparently a fight for occupation/control of the nest box, as a similar battle had ensued the previous season too. During the course of the day I noticed the mother Sparrow engaging the Magpie Robins in several aerial encounters around the nest. Finally the Magpie Robins had to give up the fight and choose another nest box a floor above.

Sparrow fledgling after the first flight

The Sparrow parents, especially the mother, put up a brave front in a tense atmosphere to ensure the chicks fledged well-nourished. On April 22, a week after the attack, the chicks successfully completed their first solo flight, to a nearby Neem tree.

Tailless mother Sparrow

The tailless mother was seen around the house, busily foraging for the young ones. And the good news is that Magpie Robins are not troubling the Sparrows any more, and the mother is growing her tail feathers back!

The mother Sparrow with the tail growing back

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Report: Sighting of Isabelline Wheatear, Osman Sagar, Hyderabad, November 2019

Text and Photo: Sudhir Moorti K

On November 16, 2019, Srikanth, Gokul and I had visited the Osman Sagar Lake as a part of our regular birding visits to this hotspot. By then, the winter visitors had started moving in, promising us a great morning of birding.

As usual we were scouting around near the lake shore, looking for waders etc. As we drove ahead, I spotted a bird perched on a rock a little ahead, which looked somewhat different from the birds usually seen there. We were not really sure, but closer examination and a few photographs confirmed our suspicions. It was an Isabelline Wheatear!

The Isabelline Wheatear *(Oenanthe isabellina)* is a small insectivorous passerine belonging to the Muscicapidae family. The common name sounds like it refers to a person's proper name, but it does not: 'Isabelline' actually refers to the bird's colouration; 'Isabella' is described as a pale grey-yellow, pale fawn, pale cream-brown or parchment colour.

The Isabelline Wheatear has a wide breeding range extending from Southern Russia, Central Asia and North-western Pakistan, and winters in Africa and North-western India, during the breeding season. It is seen mainly in open tracts of land and dry, arid regions.

Finding it this far down the subcontinent was surely a rare treat, although I had personally sighted it a few years ago elsewhere in Telangana. This is probably a first record for Osman Sagar Lake, but record or not, the sighting had definitely made our day.

Isabelline Wheatear

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Report: Sighting of Smooth-coated Otter, Himayat Sagar, Hyderabad, May 10, 2020

Text: Srikanth Bhamidipati; Photos: Gokul Krishna Addanki

Smooth-coated Otter

On May 10, 2020, at around 8.25AM, Gokul and I were birdwatching in Himayat Sagar, one of the prime habitats near Hyderabad, when we stopped to observe a flock of Terns creating a ruckus behind some boulders at the edge of the lake. The behaviour seemed unusual, as they were away from the water and it looked like they were mobbing something.

Suddenly, we saw a mammal running towards the water and started taking photographs. To our surprise it turned out to be a Smooth-coated Otter, and we were surprised to see this mammal so close to the city. Since this is a species that usually moves in packs, we walked towards the lake, hoping to see more of them, and did spot multiple tracks; however, we were not able to conclude if it was indeed a pack, or just one individual.

This species is marked as Vulnerable in the IUCN Red List. India is home to three of the 13 species of Otters in the world:

1. Smooth-coated Otter
2. Eurasian Otter
3. Small-clawed Otter

They feed mostly on fish, crabs, lobsters, crayfish, shrimps, prawns, krill, woodlice, and barnacles.

The Smooth-coated Otter, which is the largest of the three species in the country, is traditionally a freshwater species but adapted to estuarine habitats.

In south India generally we find the Smooth-coated Otters; previously these species had been found in Adilabad, Karimnagar, Khammam, Medak, and Warangal districts. Sighting one so close to the city of Hyderabad is a very important and key find, as this species is on the IUCN Red List, and it is also a Schedule 2 species under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972.

Hence, it is important to protect the species and the habitat supporting it as well. Creating awareness is key and there is a great need to educate the people in this region of the importance of conserving this habitat, both for themselves as well as the Otters and other key scheduled species that visit this location. While the habitat has been under a lot of strain, there is the need for a set policy with guidelines that accurately explain the measures required to be put in place to preserve and protect this prime location.

This sighting is a really important one. Also, these 2 locations – Himayat Sagar and Osman Sagar – are home to about 300 species of birds, 5 mammals, various fishes and other species of plants, including more than 5 species of birds and mammals falling under the IUCN Red List and Scheduled Species list. Therefore, necessary steps must be taken, involving all wildlife communities, for the search of potential dens and the possibility of existence of the species in nearby habitats and hotspots like Osman Sagar and other parts of the Musi River.

Smooth-coated Otter

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*)

Black-winged Kite Adult (L) (Rollapadu, October 4, 2018) **and Juvenile (R)** (Ankola, February 19, 2012)

Order: Accipitriformes
Family: Accipitridae
Genus: *Elanus*
Species: *E. caeruleus*
Size: 31-35 cm

Description & distribution: The Black-winged Kite is a small diurnal bird of prey. It is primarily white and grey in colour, with black shoulder patches, wing tips and eye stripe. Head and underparts are white. Bill is black with a yellow cere, short, and has a hooked upper mandible. The wings are long and pointed, as in Falcons, and extend beyond the tail when perched. In flight, the short, unforked tail is clearly visible. Central tail feathers are bluish-grey while outer tail feathers are white. Inner vanes of feathers have velvety barbules; their soft feathers have sometimes been seen as instrumental in dispersing grass seeds, though it may interfere in flight. Short bare legs and feet are yellow, and the feet show zygodactyly – that is, two toes face forward and two face back. The large owl-like forward-facing eyes, placed under a bony shelf, have red irises. Sexes are similar, but juvenile birds have a scaly back, sooty-grey shoulders, fine brownish streaks on breast, and a brownish wash on head and underparts.

Three sub-species are recognized: the nominate *E. c. caeruleus*, seen in southwest Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), sub-Saharan Africa and southwest Arabia; *E. c. vociferus*, seen across the Indian sub-continent, east China, Malay Peninsula and Indochina; and *E. c. hypoleucus*, found in Greater and Lesser Sunda Islands (Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Sulawesi), New Guinea and the Philippines.

Habitat & behaviour: The Black-winged Kite is usually seen singly near semi-desert areas, open lands, cultivated fields and grasslands and are often seen perched on wires, scanning the ground for rodents. They are best known for their ability to hover in one place before making a dive to catch the identified prey. Although generally seen in the plains, there are several records at higher altitudes in the Nilgiris, Sikkim, Nagaland and some parts of the Western Ghats. Besides rodents, their diet includes grasshoppers, crickets and other large insects, and occasionally, small snakes, frogs, lizards and injured birds. They usually feed on a perch but may eat on the ground in case of large prey. The call is a high-pitched squeal or a soft whistle, uttered mainly during breeding season or at the roost, where communal groups of 15 to 35 may sometimes be seen.

Nesting: The Black-winged Kite breeds at different times across its range. In India, it is known to build nests around the year, while it seems to breed throughout the year except in April and May. Courtship is noisy and often involves chases; once the pair is formed, they copulate frequently. The nest is a loose platform of twigs, and the usual clutch consists of 3-4 pale creamy eggs with deep red spots. Nest-building and incubation duties are shared by both parents, but once the chicks are hatched, the male focuses more on foraging. Females also hunt, usually close to the nest, and handle the initial feeding. Once fledged, the young birds continue to depend on the male parent for food, for around 80 days. Females are also known to desert the nest before the young birds fledge, leaving the hunting and feeding to the male. Both males and females show considerable nomadism.

Local name: The Black-winged Kite is known as *'Kapassi'* or *'Kapasi'* in Hindi, Gujarati and Bengali, *'Adavi ramadasu'* in Telugu, *'Chitti'* in Punjabi, and '*Velli-eriyan'* or *'Ukussa'* in Malayalam.

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